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**Mr. Mom No More: The Rise of the Male Caregiver and His
Implications on the Marketing Landscape**

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Report

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Abstract

Mr. Mom No More: The Rise of the Male Caregiver and His Implications on the Marketing Landscape

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The population of male primary caregivers in the United States has risen dramatically within the past decade. Accompanying this trend is the evolution of fathers and their impact in the home. The modern dad is more involved in parenting and housework than in previous generations. Despite fathers' growing role in the home, current depictions of dads on TV merely perpetuate the portrayal of dads as blundering and incompetent. Analysis of current depictions of mothers and fathers in TV ads and shows reveals the gap between today's parenting reality and pop culture's rendering of reality. Further exploration into the shifting parenting landscape and notions of masculinity yields a population of fathers who not only welcome increased responsibility at home, but also act as thought leaders and influencers in the parenting realm. By committing to the development of accurate and balanced depictions of dads on TV, marketers have the opportunity to harness this growing population's influence and gain vocal and technologically savvy brand advocates.

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Introduction

Today, more men than ever before are serving as primary caretakers of their children in the United States (Williams, 2012). As such, there is more friction than ever between depictions of fathers on TV and the lives U.S. fathers are leading (Traister, 2012). Marketers and advertisers should be aware of the dangers of continuing antiquated portrayals of “the bumbling dad” and perpetuating the stigma that full-time fathers are simply “dads doing mom stuff.”

Compared to other parts of the world, the U.S. clings to its archaic notion of parenting and gender roles. In Sweden, 85% of fathers take parental leave to be with their children (Bennhold, 2010), which goes without any judgment or question from their friends, family and colleagues. Despite the fact that the role of dad is evolving in the United States (Belkin, 2010), this evolution is not reflected in depictions of popular culture. The result is a disconnect between the reality of parenting in the U.S. and what society presents as the parenting experience, leading to equally disconnected consumers from advertising messaging.

This report analyzes the portrayals of fathers versus portrayals of mothers in current ads and TV shows. An outline of the shifts in the parenting landscape as well as masculinity reveals the importance of framing fathers in a more accurate and competent light. Finally, a section focused on how to reach dads guide marketers and advertisers to more meaningful communications with contemporary fathers. This report asserts that a better understanding of the modern dad illuminates benefits of investing in this population. The goal for advertisers and marketers should be to support and empower

fathers as consumers of household goods as this population has the potential to become thought leaders and influencers in this category.

Depictions of Mothers and Fathers in Ads

JOHNSON'S, "YOU'RE DOING OK, MOM!"

This commercial from Johnson & Johnson serves as words of encouragement from a baby to his mother. A clearly mature, yet boyish male voice provides the stream-of-consciousness of the baby throughout the ad. The voiceover is as follows: "I think this is a good time to tell you, you're doing OK, Mom. I can call you Mom, right? I know we haven't known each other very long, but you seem like a real keeper. You're not perfect. There was that strained carrots incident, but you're trying. You pick up my bottle every time I toss it out of my stroller. That's high comedy to an eight month-old. You hum "The Barber of Seville" when you wash my hair. So cool. And your rub-downs are out of this world. Anyway, I want you to know how much I appreciate you. You know, right? How much I love you? You're doing OK, mom."

The only other noises we hear in the ad are derived from the *mise-en-scène*: running bathwater and the occasional sound of a baby's laugh. Scenes of mothers bathing her child, dressing him, lifting him in the air, playing peek-a-boo and gently cradling him accompany the affectionate words of the voiceover. The commercial creates a feeling of tenderness by utilizing soft lighting, melodic piano music along with flowing, slow, subtle movements from the babies and moms. All the elements of the ad combine to depict idyllic moments of mother and child.

This commercial is surreal. The voiceover suggests that while the mother is flawed, she is still admired. We have to take the baby's word for it since the images used

throughout the ad represent only relaxed and carefree moments. There is no evidence of crying babies or frustrated and exhausted mothers. The ad chooses to reflect the moments a mother will remember and cherish with her baby instead of the tiny “new mom” hiccups that may occur along the way. It also attempts to provide affirmation that what mothers do gets noticed and appreciated by their babies. Largely, the commercial paints a romantic portrait of motherhood.

P&G, OLYMPICS MOM AD

Set to the stirring melody of “Divenire” by Ludovico Einaudi, Proctor and Gamble released this two-minute ad, which aired preceding and throughout the 2012 Olympic Games. The focus of the commercial is on mothers from different cultures and countries as they go about their day taking care of their child athlete. Despite the differences in geographic location and culture, the daily lives of these women mirror each other. They wake up their young child and prepare them breakfast before transporting them to train for their sport of choice. One child is a gymnast, another a swimmer, a sprinter, and a volleyball player. These mothers watch their children train and then wake up and do it all again. Images of the children’s training and progress are interspersed with shots of the mothers doing laundry and washing dishes. Throughout the spot, the mothers watch their child train, grow older, and face setbacks. The action culminates in all of the children competing in the Olympics. Scenes of the proud mothers celebrating with their children, or being recognized by their children, close the ad. The only copy appears at the end: “The hardest job in the world, is the best job in the world. Thank you, Mom.” The

voiceover of a woman ends the ad with, “P&G. Proud sponsor of moms.”

The mothers of these athletes are depicted as being the sole caregiver for her kids. She is the only family member taking them to practices, watching them train and compete, undertaking all the housework day in and day out, celebrating victories, and being the source of her child’s comfort during defeat. Admittedly, this surely is the reality for some Olympic athletes. But is this depiction true for most Olympians? And if we look at it from a less elite sports level, is this depiction true for most kids in little league, on recreational soccer teams and in dance classes? Is the father truly that absent? On another level, the ad places a tremendous amount of pressure on mothers. By showing the moms as the only caregiver, and only family member for that matter, the ad potentially implies that moms don’t need any help in raising their children and meeting daily household obligations. This reiterates the age-old notion that mothers can and should take on anything and everything in the home, without assistance.

Another qualm with this ad comes at the very end. The copy stating, “The hardest job in the world, is the best job in the world. Thank you, Mom” adds anti-dad sentiments, whether intentionally or not. While not explicitly stating so, the copy leads the audience to believe “the hardest job in the world” is being a mother. Where does this leave all the primary caregivers who are men as well as the highly involved dads? By leaving them out, men who perform all the tasks depicted in the ad are grouped into the category of “mothers.”

CAPRI SUN SUPER V, FEATURING PAULA EBERT

This ad opens as a woman picks up a box of Capri Sun at the grocery store. She begins to look off into the distance, deep in thought, while the voiceover begins, “If Paula Ebert had her way, she would help her child...with everything.” What follows is a series of scenarios in which Paula envisions herself helping her son. We see her sitting alongside him in science class and offering correct answers on his behalf. She rides behind her son on a tandem bicycle and emphatically encourages him on while he races his friends. Paula protects her son during a game of dodgeball by standing in front of him, arms outstretched, and reassuring him that “mommy’s here.” Lastly, while her son is engaged in a conversation with his friends at school, Paula combs his hair and laughs the loudest at his anecdote. The voiceover resumes, “But that kind of love is frowned upon. So instead she gives him new Capri Sun Super V, so he gets more of what he needs without all the her he doesn’t think he needs.”

What the Paula Ebert ad brings to the depictions of moms on TV is the notion of being a “helicopter mom.” Helicopter parenting is “a style of child rearing in which an overprotective mother or father discourages a child's independence by being too involved in the child's life.” As her kids age, it is common for moms to still view their children as creatures in constant need of care and protection. It can be difficult to accept the transition of a child from entirely dependent to taking steps toward self-sufficiency. This commercial pokes fun at the nearly universal desire to hold your kid’s hand through life. Some moms may see a bit of themselves in this ad; for others it may serve as a cautionary tale of what’s to come once their child ages. Despite the overzealous actions shown via

Paula's daydream, we know they come from a place of love and devotion to her child. That is something mothers can easily relate to.

LUVS, "BREASTFEEDING"

This Luvs commercial begins with a shot of a woman, seated in some remote area of a public building, struggling with something under a blanket, which is draped over her shoulder and across her chest. The woman looks disheveled, flustered and self-aware. We hear faint, vaguely Italian music playing, signaling the action is taking place in an Italian restaurant. There are also sounds of a baby, though there is no baby in sight. The woman looks around, uneasily. We can surmise she is struggling with subtlety while breastfeeding her child. The action freezes and the words "First kid" appear on the screen along with a voiceover of a woman stating the same two words. Next, a male waiter walks into the frame with a smile, about to say something. Very quickly the man turns wide-eyed and freezes with his mouth slightly ajar. The camera switches to a close-up of a baby latched on to a woman's somewhat exposed breast. The camera pans up and we see it is the same woman as before, this time nursing an infant right at her table. She appears stylish, put-together and confident, a complete transformation from before. The woman notices the waiter fixated on the fact that she is nursing, so she says to him, "Oh, hey, up here" and points to her own eyes, a signal to divert his attention elsewhere. The woman smiles. Again, the action freezes and the words "Second kid" appear on screen along with the same two words spoken via voiceover. The voiceover continues, "By their second kid, every mom is an expert and more likely to choose Luvs."

Controversy surrounded the ad when it first aired in fall of 2012. Some found the commercial plucky and progressive, while others believed it was politically charged and distasteful. The brand chose to take a risk and make a clear stand on what is presently a hotly contested issue in the United States. Regardless of whether you love it or hate it or are completely indifferent, the ad is memorable. It is also interesting that in choosing to tackle an issue so current, the commercial inherently dates itself. When compared to the other three ads, this one doesn't have the timeless quality that the Johnson's commercial has in particular. Instead of play it safe and catering to the maternal instincts of its audience, Luvs decided to stand out. Like it or not, they achieved that.

GOOGLE CHROME, "DEAR SOPHIE"

The first of the father-centric ads follows a dad as he chronicles his daughter's young life. At the very beginning of the spot, a Gmail account is created for Sophie Lee. An email is sent to Sophie that reads, "Dear Sophie, I'm still getting the hang of holding you..." Attached is a picture of a man holding his newborn daughter. The commercial continues with a series of emails along with various media being sent to Sophie. The next email has the subject of "Happy First Birthday!" Attached to this email is a video of a baby sitting upright in a large bed. A man's voice asks, "You ready for your big party today?" The baby laughs. We then see a YouTube upload entitled "This was Mom's idea." In the video, toddler Sophie is seen crying while on some kind of train ride. The following emails, pictures and videos document Sophie becoming a big sister, staying in the hospital and celebrating her fourth birthday. Sophie's dad includes an image of the

family's home for Sophie's first four years and a picture drawn by Sophie for Father's Day. We see a collection of web photo albums, Sophie falling down while snowboarding, a picture of Sophie with missing teeth and videos of bike rides and ballet class. The final email of the ad has the subject, "You're growing up so fast." In the email, Sophie's dad notes that he has been writing his daughter since she was born. In closing, he writes, "I can't wait to share these with you someday. Until then...Love, Dad."

This ad is a good example of the ways in which fathers are frequently portrayed as sensitive and sentimental when it comes to their children. In fact, it is fair to say that Sophie's father is an extremely dedicated parent and is present in his child's life. The feel-good ad has the potential to tug at the heartstrings of mothers and fathers alike. However, further analysis shows that the ad is not as progressive as one may initially believe. Mainly, the ad never shows Sophie's dad in an active parenting capacity. Albeit, neither is Sophie's mom. The ad leads us to believe that Sophie's dad is the one behind the camera. We do hear his voice from behind the camera in one video, so why should we trust he is not always behind the camera? This implies that while Sophie's dad is occupied with documenting every aspect of his daughter's life, Sophie's mom is left to do the actual hands-on parenting. Thus, the take-away is that fathers can be thoughtful, competent and engaged in their child's life, so long as they are not shown actively caring for the child.

SUBARU, “BABY DRIVER”

The ad opens with a man leaning into the passenger’s side window in a driveway that we assume is his own. He asks the driver, “So, your seat good? Your mirrors all adjusted? You can see everything okay?” Halfway through the second sentence, we see to whom he is talking: a little blonde-haired girl, no older than four years of age. The girl, presumably the man’s daughter, struggles to buckle her seatbelt as she looks to her dad. The man continues, “Just stay off the freeways, alright? I don’t want you going out on those yet.” The girl nods her head. “Leave your phone in your purse. I don’t want you texting...” The little girl cuts him off by saying, “Daddy, okay!” as she tucks her knees toward her upper-body and playfully wraps the seatbelt around her legs. The dad says, “Okay. Here ya go.” and hands her the car keys. The girl takes them and smiles at the man. After a pause, the man looks at his daughter and says, “Be careful.” We hear a more mature female voice reply, “Thanks, dad.” When we cut back to the driver, we see the daughter as she actually is: a sixteen-year-old with long, wavy blonde hair. Her dad’s final words of advice are, “Call me, but not while you’re driving.” The daughter backs the car out of the driveway and waves to her dad as she drives away. The dad waves back. At the very end, we hear the voiceover, “We knew this day was coming. That’s why we bought a Subaru.”

Much like the Google Chrome ad, this Subaru commercial exemplifies the love and care a father has for his child. Interesting though that both commercials featuring a tender fathering moment occur with daughters. It’s as if in order to create a genteel, honest, emotional moment between father and child, the child must be female.

What takes this commercial a step above that of Google Chrome's is that the father does engage in a bit of parenting by making sure everything in the care is adjusted to suit his daughter and reminding her to stay safe by keeping her phone out of sight and avoiding the highway. By the way the daughter reacts to her dad's prompts this is old news. Conversations regarding expectations and concerns have likely taken place beforehand.

As his daughter drives away, not only physically, but metaphorically into a new stage of independence, the father is left to accept that he has done everything a parent can do to prepare himself as well as and his child for this moment. Overall, this is another ad that can appeal to both men and women, young and old.

CLOROX, "MOM WILL NEVER KNOW"

In this Clorox 2 ad from 2011, the premise involves a classic trope embodying the idea that when mom is away, dad and the children will play. We see the mother leaving for time away from the family. Immediately following mom's departure, the woman's husband and two children (along with 2 other dads and their children) engage in a battle. The main dad acts as giddy and juvenile as his young children as they fill water guns with various juices and soy sauce. The team of dads appears to have victory over the kids in the water gun fight when suddenly lasagna (their dinner for the evening) flies through the air via a slingshot and covers the dads in a saucy, pasta mess. The main dad then receives a phone call from his wife saying that she forgot something and is on her way back home. His two kids panic stating, "We're busted" and "There goes my allowance." One of the

other dads is just as nervous and admits, “I can’t get caught. I’m already grounded.” The main dad springs into action and cleans all of the stained clothes with Clorox 2. When he admires the freshly laundered clothes and finds no evidence of any misbehavior, the dad giggles with delight. We hear the mom enter the house and ask her husband in a puzzled manner, “Are you doing laundry?” which implies that he doesn’t typically have a hand in the household task. The tagline for the ad is, “Get your dirtiest. Mom will never know.”

This is exactly the kind of ad that does nothing but alienate dads as well as moms. What mother enjoys the thought of a household in chaos the moment she leaves the home? And what father wishes to see himself interpreted as a reckless parent, dumbed down to the level of his adolescent kids? Not only do the fathers featured in this ad completely abandon their role as parent, it is made clear that they are treated as children even with wives around. In a moment that I’m sure was meant to produce a chuckle, one dad admits that he has already been grounded, making it clear that there is only one adult running the house: mom.

The father’s desire to put having fun above being a parent also reveals his lack of contribution to household tasks, such as laundry. The way the wife questions if the dad is doing laundry leads the audience to believe the man has not so much as stepped in the laundry room before. The portrayal of irresponsibility on behalf of fathers and total household dominance by mothers is enough to question the intended target of this ad.

HUGGIES, “DAD TEST – EASY CHAIR”

A 2012 Huggies commercial begins with the voiceover: “To prove Huggies diapers can handle anything, we asked real dads to put them to the test with their own babies at nap time after a very full feeding.” The ad features five dads feeding their child while rocking in recliners, each cradling their baby. Some lightly pat the baby’s back after feeding and one father gently sweeps hair from the eyes of his dozing child. All children fall into a deep, lengthy slumber and the dads are pleased to find the diapers prevent any leaking.

All in all, the commercial appears to deliver an illustration of involved fathers that is rarely seen in ads. However, what prefaced the airing of this commercial was a different Huggies ad which produced such tremendous backlash that the company pulled it from the airwaves and made several apologies, some via social and traditional media, and others in person. The original “dad test” ad featured dads engrossed by a sports game on television. Their young children were nearby, but clearly not the focus of the fathers’ attention. The ad implied that the “test” was to see if Huggies diapers could withstand hours of neglect while a group of dads collectively enjoyed watching a game. The original commercial sparked immediate outrage with fathers and shortly a petition was created that ended up garnering over 1300 signatures. Full-time at-home parent, Chris Routly was the originator behind the “We’re Dads, Huggies. Not Dummies.” petition. The petition stated:

Why is a dad on diaper duty an appropriate or meaningful test of the product in any way a mom using them is not? Why reduce dads to being little more than test dummy parents, putting diapers and wipes through a "worst-case

scenario" crash course of misuse and abuse? Is that what HUGGIES thinks dads do? We leave our children in overflowing diapers because sports is more important to us? Really? These HUGGIES ads literally use the line "Dads push diapers and wipes to the limit." No, HUGGIES, dads don't do that. Poor manufacturing does that. A large bottle before naptime does that. Feeding your kid too much fiber does that. Babies do that. But dads don't use diapers and wipes any differently than moms.

Adding insult to injury, the brand director for Huggies, Aric Melzl, admitted that although the brand acted quickly in rectifying the offensive ad, it wasn't done to appease the male market exactly. Huggies only concern was that the men who were complaining have the ear of their wives, who comprise the actual target market. Blunder on top of blunder, Huggies managed to dig themselves a deep hole and incense thousands of fathers all with one thirty-second commercial.

Depiction of Fathers and Mothers in TV Today

GUYS WITH KIDS

Guys With Kids is an American sitcom created by Jimmy Fallon, Charlie Grandy and Amy Ozols. It premiered on September 26, 2012 at 8:30 EST on NBC. *Guys With Kids* focuses on the trials and tribulations of three men in their 30s, all of whom have young children. The first scene of the pilot episode opens in a sports bar. The audience sees the backs of three men as they stand at the bar, all cheering at the television positioned above the bar, broadcasting a basketball game. After a successful play by their team, the three fans turn around in celebration. That is when we realize each one of the men has a baby placed in a baby carrier across their fronts. And so it begins.

A sitcom focused on fathers of young children could have been refreshing and a pleasure to watch. However, *Guys With Kids* is no such sitcom. Instead, it capitalizes on the misconception that all fathers are merely children themselves and clueless when it comes to raising their kids. In fact, only one of the fathers featured in the show appears to do any actual parenting. The character Gary (Anthony Anderson) is a stay-at-home father of four young boys. Unfortunately, the show decides to simply focus on the chaos that comes with having four children, often showing an exhausted, frustrated Gary who is more of a friend to his kids than an authority figure. At one point in the pilot episode, all three fathers are out shopping for clothes. Throughout the scene, Gary has one of his kids on a

child leash and pays very little mind to him. The child at the end of the leash is never seen on camera, but by the end of the scene, we gather that he has begun to misbehave as evidenced by Gary reprimanding him and yanking on the leash. That is one of the only instances of parenting we see from the stay-at-home father in the pilot episode, which results in more of an attempt at slapstick than anything else.

The other fathers, Chris (Jesse Bradford) and Nick (Zach Cregger), are no better. The show essentially boils down their children to mere props. In the pilot episode, Chris, who is recently divorced, is approached by an attractive woman at the bar who comments on how cute his baby is. This encounter leads to Nick referring to the child as a “little wing man.” Also during the pilot episode, Chris convinces former professional basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to “dunk” his son during a photo op. The infantile nature of Nick is perpetuated by the fact that he is shown drinking children’s juice packs throughout the pilot episode. Nick’s goofy, harmless demeanor likens him more to a dopey Labrador than a mature father of two. Chris, on the other hand, is a first time father and recently divorced from the child’s mother. Chris has the tendency of becoming a pushover when it comes to expressing opinions about his son. He admits that his ex-wife, Sheila (Erinn Hayes) uses the logic “he grew inside me” to get her way regarding everything pertaining to their son. By the end of the pilot episode, Chris convinces Sheila that they need to start working together for their child’s sake. Sheila agrees. The confident, capable father persona Chris worked at to gain by

the end of the pilot episode somewhat disappears by the next episode when he walks into his apartment to find his son in the living room and exclaims, “Ernie, is it my weekend to watch you? Did I leave you here?” He hadn’t, but the thought accurately depicts how distanced Chris is from his son.

To be fair, Sheila is the only authoritative figure featured in the show. Gary’s wife Marny (Tempestt Bledsoe) and Nick’s wife Emily (Jamie-Lynn Sigler) are nearly as juvenile as their husbands. All of the main characters have a distaste for Sheila for various reasons, including the fact that her parenting style makes Emily insecure in her own parenting. Essentially though, it boils down to the fact that there are five adults with kids who behave like children themselves and resent the adult who counters their immaturity with capability and aptness. *Guys With Kids* may intend to reflect the lives of the modern-day father, but it is doubtful that the viewers are convinced.

BEN AND KATE

Not surprisingly, there were no sitcoms on network TV in the fall of 2012 with a focus on thirty-something-aged mothers as they stumble their way through parenthood. Why doesn’t “Gals With Kids” work? Because the thought of mothers and their children doesn’t make you roll your eyes and laugh. Mixing men with their children immediately evokes an expectation of cluelessness, lawlessness and hijinks. However, there is one trend that sticks out regarding motherhood in networks shows premiering in fall 2012. Both NBC and FOX premiered shows with eerily similar mother figures. *Ben and Kate*

tells the tale of Kate (Dakota Johnson) who had her daughter, Maddie (Maggie Elizabeth Jones), when she was quite young. Kate has sacrificed much of her love and personal life to make sure her daughter is raised in a stable environment. Kate's brother, Ben (Nat Faxon), transiently pops in and out of her life until he one day unexpectedly decides to stick around.

Ben is a bit of a ne'er-do-well, always up to something and irresponsible, but he means well, especially when it comes to Kate and Maddie. Kate even mentions in the pilot episode that while Ben and she essentially raised themselves, Ben "never grew up." Even though Ben decides to stay with Kate and support her, he causes a few headaches. In one instance, Ben took Maddie late to school every day one week. His saving grace is his charm. Ben is able to talk himself out of almost anything.

In complete contrast to Ben's imprudence, Kate is a pillar of shrewdness, willing to do anything and everything for the betterment of her daughter. Kate isn't flawless, but her flaws have more to do with the repercussions of her own upbringing and having a child so young, rather than being an ineffectual parent. In fact, Kate was able to keep Maddie in an excellent school district because the principal deemed Kate a "worthy parent."

The story at the core of *Ben and Kate* is analogous to NBC's *The New Normal*. Goldie Clemmons (Georgia King) is a single mother determined to change her and her daughter's life for the better. Much like Kate, Goldie had her daughter very young and struggles at times to provide an ideal life for her child. Goldie decides to break away from her dead-end life and becomes a surrogate mother for a gay couple. The show

follows the colorful group of characters that surround Goldie and her daughter during this new chapter of their lives. Both stories capture the “motherly” desire to set a good example for her child and provide a life that is better in quality than their own.

In both *Ben and Kate* and *The New Normal*, the children featured are mature beyond their young years. Neither has had a stable father figure in their lives, and both shows fill that father figure with a plethora of quirky and supportive characters. The blatant absence of a nuclear family coupled with the settled, bright nature of the both children could be interpreted as a statement that a father isn’t needed in order to raise children. The fact that one of the daughter’s fathers was a dead-beat and the other ran away the instant he discovered he was going to be a dad does nothing to enhance the reputation of fathers either. Clearly TV networks consider the subject of young single mothers with the aim of enriching their child’s life one with which viewers can resonate and appreciate.

Reaching Dads

Why does the depiction of dads in commercials and television shows even matter? Truthfully, it matters because dads say so. The dad community has become much more vocal and unified within the past ten years or so and many dads feel they aren't being portrayed with any accuracy. It is time to change the way advertisers and marketers speak to dads. To better understand who these men are, we must keep in mind four main issues: the cultural shift in the parenting landscape, the cultural shift in the idea of masculinity, the thriving online dad community and the delicate task of balancing our messaging.

SHIFT IN THE PARENTING LANDSCAPE

Over the past decade, the United States has seen a surge of men taking on the role of caregiver to their children. Currently, 40% of women make more than their husbands (Williams, 2012). Couple that figure with the fact that parents cite the cost of childcare as a massive drain on their income and it isn't much of a surprise that many dads have entered into the world of stay-at-home parenting. In 2012, it is estimated that 176,000 men have left the workforce to raise their children while another 626,000 men freelance/work part-time, but serve as the primary caretaker in their household (Williams, 2012). Undeniably the percentage of fathers as primary caretakers remains infinitesimal when compared to mothers in the same role. However, the growth of this group of male caretakers in such a short period of time has been tremendous and doesn't show any indication of diminishing anytime soon.

However, the shift in the parenting landscape isn't relegated exclusively to the dads serving as primary caretakers. The modern day dad has become more involved in his children's lives whether he decides to stay at home or otherwise. It is no longer uncommon for men to take an active interest in their child's life even before they are born, as evidenced by the growing collection of literature for the "expectant father." Men have come to more readily acknowledge and embrace their involvement from very early and the involvement only continues to develop after the child is born.

Interestingly, the shift in the parenting landscape even extends into issues of linguistics. Within the context of childcare, the terms "to mother" and "to father" have markedly different connotations. As Donald Unger mentions in his book, *Men Can: The Changing Image and Reality of Fatherhood in America*, "popular perception is that women actively 'take care of' children, while men passively 'look after them'" (Unger, 2010). Although it may appear to be petty semantics, language is powerful and is something marketers and advertisers utilize with intention. It is imperative to understand and be aware of the implication of language and terminology.

SHIFT IN THE IDEA OF MASCULINITY

Currently, many Americans remain perplexed by men who serve as primary caregiver to their children. The notion of eschewing a career causes some to look at that father askance. To many, this is simply not what a man's role is. And for some of these dads, their masculinity is called into question. It is interesting and important to note that on a societal level, masculinity has evolved, not declined (Traister, 2012). A recent Ad

Age Insights report “explores the many ways men's lives today represent a significant departure from those of their fathers and grandfathers.” The study discovered that 71% of men say keeping a neat, organized home is a top priority with 41% of men spending over 4 hours per week doing housework. Along with housework, many men are no longer strangers to the kitchen. Roughly 45% of men spend over 4 hours per week cooking and 16% of men cook for fun. Even more of a departure from tradition is the discovery that 13% of men bake for fun. In fact, that number is even higher among Gen X men (15.36%) and Millennial men (14.7%) (Kerwin, 2012).

No longer will all men connect with overtly macho messages and images. Nor will marketers be able to capture much positive attention through stereotypes of sexism and incompetence. That just isn't the reality of the modern man. Today's man is multi-dimensional and is less bound by traditional gender roles. One key aspect of speaking to today's man is finding the proper approach. Although many men like to keep a tidy house, bake and take on a more active role with their kids, they should still be spoken to as a man. So even when taking a softer approach, don't lose the masculinity. As masculinity continues to evolve, so should the way marketers and advertisers appeal to men.

DADS AS A VOCAL/TIGHT COMMUNITY

Presently, the Internet is experiencing the rise of the daddy blog. Much like its counterpart, the mommy blog, daddy blogs are one way the parenting community bonds and disseminates information to each other. As the population of male caregivers grows,

so does their voice. Dads have begun to form their own communities of support and education that include not only blogs, but conferences and other published works as well.

Daddy blogs are not uncommon today and many have developed quite a readership base. Reasons for beginning a blog vary; for some it is merely an outlet, for others it becomes a career they are able to sustain while staying at home and caring for the kids. A common aspect of some of the most popular and widely read daddy blogs is the honesty and vulnerability with which these fathers write. Stay-at-home dad, Mike Adamick, writes one popular blog, “Cry It Out”. Adamick’s blog posts go much deeper than simply detailing daily activities with his daughter. He utilizes introspection to reveal the psychology of being a parent. Posts are funny, thought provoking and written with a high level of skill. Adamick succeeds in developing a blog incredibly specific to his situation, yet engaging enough to draw a large and diverse audience. Another popular blogger is Matt Logelin of the blog “Matt, Liz and Madeline.” Quite a situational juxtaposition to Adamick, Logelin raises his daughter as a single parent after his wife passed away shortly after giving birth. Logelin cautions readers that his blog deals with themes such as loss and sadness, setting the tone for a blog that is painfully and beautifully candid. In yet another vastly different parenting circumstance, Rob Rummel-Hudson authors a blog entitled “Fighting Monsters with Rubber Swords.” Rummel-Hudson writes from the perspective of a parent whose child was diagnosed with a disability. His daughter lives with Bilateral Perisylvian Polymicrogyria, which is a rare neurological condition. This condition resulted in his daughter’s inability to speak. Rummel-Hudson’s blog is full of posts detailing triumphs, hope, frustration and

heartache as he educates us all about the strength and patience of a parent with a disabled child. Blogs are extremely useful for gaining deep, rich insights into the life of a father, which allows for a better understanding of who these men are and what is important to them.

Outside of the digital realm, fathers are gathering by the hundreds once a year to participate in Dad 2.0 Summit, “an annual conference where marketers, social media leaders, and blogging parents connect to discuss the changing voice and perception of modern fatherhood.” One main objective of the conference is to empower dads to participate and thrive in their social media endeavors, much like the mom community has done in recent years. The inaugural Dad 2.0 Summit took place in March 2012 in Austin, TX and featured panels such as: “Masculinity and the Freedom to Self-Define,” “Dads and Technology: Much More Than ‘Boys With Toys,’” and “The Myth of the Mancession: The Fundamental Shift in Men’s Roles in the Household.” Despite being a new kid on the conference block, Dad 2.0 Summit has managed to acquire big name sponsors, a feat which exemplifies the potential importance of the dad market. Current and past sponsors include Dove Men+Care, Honda, Tide, Phillips Norelco, Johnson & Johnson and LG Electronics.

If online presence is any indication, the dad community will continue to grow and become more visible and vocal online and off. No longer anomalies, dads are making themselves heard and it’s time to listen.

BALANCING THE MESSAGE

While appealing to fathers in advertising and marketing messages is of importance, mothers will remain the core group for marketers to target due to their sheer size. Even as such, how fathers are depicted in ads and on TV matters. If we view the bumbling, clueless dad portrayals through the lens of a mom, such depictions potentially ingrain the idea in women's minds that it is irresponsible to leave more housework and childcare up to dad. Granted, this could very well be a strategic decision on the part of marketers based on the fact that they want moms to purchase their products. Incompetent dad depictions reaffirm the notion that the mother is the head of household, which is a main reason why marketers target them in the first place. What these marketers need to recognize is the partnership present in many households today. No mom wants to feel pressure to resign herself to all household responsibilities. There is more of a parenting and housework balance between parents today (Chaet, 2012) and representing that balance should become part of marketers' new strategy. One key of successfully marketing to parents will be to create authentic portrayals while balancing the message between moms and dads.

This balance becomes important when taking into account the self-image of both moms and dads. Adweek reported, "each parent perceives he or she does more of the grocery shopping, with 70 percent of dads maintaining they commandeer the Trader Joe's cart while only 36 percent of moms agree" (Chaet, 2012). What we are currently experiencing is the growing opportunity to appeal to both moms and dads. Not only are fathers emerging as a consumer base, they are emerging as informed and sophisticated

consumers to boot. If marketers seize the opportunity to reach out to the dad population early, they will likely be rewarded with the ability to harness this group's influence. More honest and accurate portrayals of fathers are likely to foster an improved connection to that audience. Leveraging that connection can lead to the empowerment of dads as consumers. Once dads trust in that connection and feel empowered, they can develop into brand advocates.

Limitations and Future Opportunities

LIMITATIONS

This report relies mainly on qualitative data and analysis due to the fact that despite a thorough search, no quantitative data was found on the U.S. stay-at-home dad phenomenon. Additionally, the report aims to focus on fathers who are male caregivers in traditional nuclear families/households (i.e. not single or divorced fathers). There exists even less quantitative secondary data on this specific segment of the population. The lack of quantitative data and the qualitative nature of the report restricts generalizations. The analysis and discussion of television shows and ads mentioned in the report are derived from the very specific point-of-view of a stay-at-home father or male caregiver. Many of the ads were not designed specifically with men as their primary target audience. Although the creators of the ads and television shows included in this report likely did not intentionally produce content to offend or insult fathers, the analysis is meant to justify the validity of viewing content through a father's perspective.

While none were addressed in this report, there are television shows on the air that present a more authentic and holistic view of parenting. For example, NBC's drama *Parenthood* follows the multi-generational Braverman family as they face the challenges of raising children. In one story arc of the show, Joel (Sam Jaeger) struggles with his role as stay-at-home dad to his daughter. Joel's wife, Julia (Erika Christensen), has a thriving career as a lawyer and serves as the breadwinner of the family. As their daughter ages and starts going to school, Joel realizes a need to regain part of his identity.

Aside from this particular storyline, *Parenthood* tackles issues regarding Asperger's, adoption, PTSD, cancer, biracial families, and more in its four seasons. The show handles all material with realism, grace and grit, making *Parenthood* a reflection of challenges faced by many families in the U.S. today.

It should also be noted that this report focuses on current TV commercials that aired between 2010 and 2012 as well as network TV shows that premiered during the fall of 2012. Past portrayals of fathers and mothers in ads were not taken into account nor were new or existing television shows airing on cable, satellite or premium channels.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

The burgeoning demographic of male caregivers in the United States is one that has potential for researchers to embrace, as it is relatively uncharted territory. For those in the fields of advertising and marketing, the time is ripe to segment the population of U.S. male caregivers to better understand their lifestyles and needs. As this consumer base grows, it will not always be appropriate to craft messages merely for "dads." It will behoove marketers to have the capability and knowledge to target specific segments of the dad population so as to forge more meaningful connections and positively affect attitude. This change in attitude could have the potential to influence purchasing behavior, essentially spurring the evolution from father to consumer.

Furthermore, researchers in the fields of marketing and advertising may begin the forecasting of future dads. The children being raised by these highly involved fathers will likely have different views of parenting than those of previous generations.

Taking how Generation Z children are raised into account when developing messaging for that target will also forge a deeper and truer connection with the group. Also, a look into the general behavior and attitudes of Millennials and those of Generation Z in regards to family and parenting will yield insights into what kind of parents these two groups will become.

Similarly worthy of future exploration is a deeper look into positive depictions of fathering in TV shows. Such shows make an effort to present a more balanced family dynamic. Returning to the example of *Parenthood*, fathers featured on the show are nuanced and go far beyond surface descriptions such as “breadwinner,” “dimwitted” or “absent.” *Parenthood* exemplifies how modern dads are nurturing, fun loving, dynamic and capable sages to their children. More sincere depictions of fathers on TV present the male caregiver population with validation and recognition. As such, these television shows have the power to impact the kind of advertising content associated with the program, providing a conduit to better reach this target group. The question becomes whether or not these sophisticated depictions of parenting reach fathers. Is a more accurate portrayal of fathering enough to draw an audience of dads? Or are there specific elements inherent in television shows with which dads connect?

Conclusion

With 66% of fathers thinking there is an “anti-dad societal bias” in the U.S. (and that number climbs to 82% among dads with children under two years-old), the time has come to bridge the gap between how we as marketers and advertisers portray the culture of fatherhood and the actual reality of the 21st century dad (Chaet, 2012). Advertisers and marketers have largely missed opportunities to connect with male caregivers up to this point, but there is still time to build favorable impressions and seize the potential of this emergent consumer base. Fifty-four percent of men believe “TV ads provide them with useful information about new products and services” (Chaet, 2012) which proves that there is a willing market ready and waiting to relate to consumer messaging.

This report details how male caregivers are a technologically savvy group and are skilled in cultivating audiences through blogs and online forums. These men are also eager to learn and leverage technology as evidenced by nascent events such as the Dad 2.0 Summit. Through more honest depictions of male caregivers in television ads and shows, it will be possible to embolden the dad population as consumers and develop them into brand advocates. As brand advocates, dads not only have the potential to influence other dads, but moms as well due to the evolving parental balance in the home. Additionally, the population’s adeptness in technology will make their influence far-reaching.

The upsurge in male caregivers is more than a trend. The affects of involved fathers will influence their children's lives and as those children age, they will no longer recognize the image of "mom in charge" as their reality either. They will grow up experiencing a household in which mother *and* father make decisions, rear children and contribute to domestic tasks. A commitment to authentic and engaging portrayals of male caregivers will allow marketers to not only tap this emerging market today, but will also prepare them for the inevitable and continual leveling of the parenting playing field in years to come.

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